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# Ping-pong poms: emotional reflexivity in contemporary return migration from Australia to the United Kingdom

Mary Holmes and Roger Burrows

## Abstract

About 20,000 people from the United Kingdom emigrate to Australia each year. Of these, a significant number return to the United Kingdom, and some return again to Australia. Studies of such patterns of migration and return (and return again) were quite common a few decades ago, but are now rare. This paper makes use of a contemporary data source – an Internet-mediated discussion forum – to explore the experiences of modern ‘ping-pong poms’. A picture emerges of these migrants as exercising emotional reflexivity in dealing with the pull of family left behind, ‘homesickness’, the lack of a sense of belonging and their often-disappointed dreams of a ‘better life’. By understanding the importance of emotions in people’s decisions about return migration, policy can better attend to the realities of more mobile lives.

**Keywords:** return migration, online discussion forums, belonging, emotional reflexivity, Australia, United Kingdom

## Introduction

Emigration from the United Kingdom to Australia has long been the subject of scholarly study,<sup>1</sup> but there are few detailed analyses of those who return,<sup>2</sup> and of the emotional aspects of return migration (Skrbiš 2008). As Hammerton and Thomson (2005: 264) express it: 'Return migrants are voices we rarely hear in Australian history. Migration histories often neglect returnees, focusing instead on the struggles and successes of the migrants who stay on'. Yet the numbers involved in such return migration are considerable. Estimates suggest that just over 25 per cent of postwar British migrants to Australia returned to the United Kingdom at some point after arrival, although not necessarily permanently (Hammerton & Thomson 2005: 264). Measuring return migration continues to be plagued by the same difficulties Appleyard (1962a, 1962b) noted in the 1960s: rates of return change markedly over time; they vary for different types of migrants; and the figures struggle to cope with the significant numbers of return migrants who then re-emigrate to Australia, and those who become back and forth serial returners (Hammerton & Thomson 2005: 264-65). To understand why significant proportions of migrants return, and why some re-migrate, we argue that it is crucial to examine the emotional reflexivity involved in migration decisions.

With the limitations of migration figures in mind, we begin by providing some indicative statistics on those who return to the United Kingdom from Australia. After explaining the concept of emotional reflexivity and why it is important in understanding migration, we give a brief outline of our exploratory study of return migrants via a popular online discussion forum. This study illustrates how migrants are emotionally reflexive in deciding whether to return 'home' permanently or re-migrate. From this data, three key emotional factors emerge in prompting return migration: feeling obliged to be near family in the United Kingdom; feelings of homesickness or a lack of belonging; and feeling disappointed that the 'dream life' they migrated in search of has not materialised.

## Patterns of migration

The largest component of Australia's population growth continues to be from net overseas migration. In 2010, for example, 57.2 per cent of recorded growth was due to immigration (Australian Government 2011: 63-66). Migrants therefore continue to be extremely important to the future development and growth of Australia (Markus et al. 2009). Historically, those from the United Kingdom, especially the English, have settled in Australia in the greatest numbers (Jupp 2001, 2004; Roe 2002; Hammerton & Thomson 2005) – partly due to immigration measures known as the white Australia policy (Windschuttle 2004; Tavan 2005). Of the 22 million people living in Australia in 2010 some 26 per cent were originally born outside of Australia and by far the largest number – over 20 per cent of these – were originally born in the United

Kingdom<sup>3</sup> (Australian Government 2011: 83). New settlers from the United Kingdom still arrive in Australia in large numbers. As Table 1 shows, between 2005 and 2010 almost 107,000 new settlers arrived from the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

However, as has long been the case, significant numbers of immigrants return to their original countries (Appleyard 1962a, 1962b; Lukomskyi & Richards 1986; Hammerton & Thomson 2005; Harper 2005; Conway & Potter 2009). Between 2005 and 2010, just over 30,000 ‘permanent settlers’ who were originally born in the United Kingdom decided to ‘permanently leave’.<sup>5</sup> Not all of them returned to the United Kingdom, but almost 18,000 (59 per cent) of them did so. Over this five-year period, the number of UK-born people leaving Australia for any destination represented over 28 per cent of the number arriving; and the proportion of UK-born people leaving to go back to the United Kingdom was almost 17 per cent of the number arriving. These figures give only a crude indication of the proportion of UK-born settlers in any annual cohort who, for whatever reasons, finally decide to return to the United Kingdom, but it is clear that the numbers are not insubstantial. It seems vital to revisit current reasons for return given that in 2009-2010, overall, some 86,300 people indicated that they were leaving Australia permanently – the highest level of emigration ever recorded.

**Table 1: UK-born settler arrivals and departures, Australia, 2005-2010**

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Over All 5 Years
Number of settler arrivals from the United Kingdom	23,290	23,223	23,236	21,545	15,555	106,849
Number of permanent departures among those born in the United Kingdom	5,353	5,626	6,047	6,160	7,127	30,313
Number of UK-born returning to the United Kingdom	3,073	3,189	3,385	3,298	4,947	17,892
Number of permanent departures among those born in the United Kingdom as a percentage of number of settler arrivals from the United Kingdom	23.0	25.2	26.0	28.6	45.8	28.4
Number of UK-born returning to the United Kingdom as a percentage of number of settler arrivals from the United Kingdom	13.2	13.7	14.6	15.3	31.8	16.7

Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Settler Arrival and Emigration Statistics, various years from <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/>.

Emotional reflexivity in return migration

Previous studies of British return migration in the 1960s found emotional reasons to be more significant than ‘structural’ issues such as un/employment, housing and general economic conditions (Appleyard 1962a, 1962b; Richardson 1968, 1974; Hammerton & Thomson 2005). These studies showed that British immigrants often felt very ‘homesick’ and sometimes failed to culturally ‘assimilate’. They also felt obligations to return due to family pressures. This research and, in particular, Hammerton and Thomson’s (2005) analysis of 257 autobiographical accounts of the experience of postwar migration and return collected in 2000, indicates that these are the most significant reasons for return (see Table 2).

Table 2: Most prevalent factors cited as influencing return to Britain, 2000

Factor	Proportion of accounts within which mentioned
Family care responsibilities in Britain/ return to be with family in Britain	14.6
Homesickness	12.7
Hated Australia/Australian attitudes to British Migrants/Australian character/ Australian society and way of life/never felt ‘Australian’ – too ‘British’	10.0
Employment related problem/unemployment	7.5
Ill-health	6.8
‘Trapped’ on return visit to Britain	5.8
Returned as planned at the outset	5.6
Marital tensions or breakdown	4.4
Pregnancy or birth of a child	3.9
Financial difficulties	3.6
Australian environment and wildlife	3.4
All other factors (each with a very low percentage)	21.7
Total N=411	100.0

Source: Recalculated from Hammerton and Thomson (2005: Table 4).

These findings suggest that the reflexivity of return migrants is highly emotionalised. Sociological theories of reflexivity have tended to focus on predominantly cognitive and rationalised understandings of how people reflect and act. These theories have usually been allied to arguments about how processes of individualisation have made traditional family and couple relationships fragile and fraught with problems (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2003). This article rests on an alternative view that within the complexity of contemporary social and intimate lives, people often need to rely on their emotions to guide their deliberations, actions and relationships in the face of a plethora of options, and of often conflicting information and advice (Holmes 2010). This emotional reflexivity is an embodied and cognitive process of interpreting and acting on one’s own and others’ feelings in shaping one’s life. It is a mode of reflexivity in which relations to others are central. We do

not have space to expand on this theoretical framework (for which, see Holmes 2010) here, but seek to use the idea of emotional reflexivity to understand the experiences and deliberations of contemporary return migrants.

As noted above, previous research has found that the most common reasons for return migration are feelings of obligation, loss and displacement. These feelings, we argue, can best be captured by way of the concept of emotional reflexivity. The most often mentioned factor is feeling obliged to care for or be near family in Britain. Feelings of 'homesickness' are also commonly reported as driving return, although homesickness is 'a troublesome term ... often used ... as a shorthand explanation which simplifies or even conceals a complex experience' (Hammerton & Thomson 2005: 285). Also mentioned is a dislike of Australia, Australians or their 'way of life'. Beyond this, a wide range of other economic, health, circumstantial, cultural and personal factors are noted (Appleyard 1962a, 1962b; Richardson 1968, 1974; Hammerton & Thomson 2005).

As brilliantly insightful as much of this research is, especially Hammerton and Thomson's (2005) richly detailed study of *Ten Pound Poms*, it refers to the experiences of people who originally migrated to Australia at any point between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, and who returned to Britain at any point up to the mid-1990s. As Lunt (2008) has recently pointed out, there is little contemporary scholarship on the issue, although the limited recent scholarship on return migration between other countries does highlight the importance of family ties and feelings about 'home' and 'belonging' (Lever-Tracy 1989: 88; Ryan 2008; Hatfield 2010; Teo 2011). In this paper we consider why contemporary British migrants to Australia return, using an exploratory qualitative study of an online discussion forum for migrants.

## The study

Internet-based discussion forums for British migrants contain rich, emotion-laden data about people's migration decisions and experiences. These digital sources of data pose challenges for sociological research (see, *inter alia*, Hine 2005; Fielding et al. 2008; Freidenberg 2011), including ethical issues. We approached the ethical challenges involved carefully by applying to the Flinders University ethics committee and outlining the issues involved in our project. The committee decided that as we were only looking at publicly accessible posts on the forum, not member-only areas, ethics approval was not required. Questions nevertheless remain about using such data without the knowledge or consent of the forum members. However, we would argue that because of their public character, ethical 'covert' research is possible with such sources, if treated carefully (Murthy 2008: 840-41; Robinson & Schulz 2009: 693-94). For example, we avoided 'lurking', so that instead of maintaining an observing, but not observable, presence, we analysed downloaded posts from one relevant thread. We also considered that those on the forum were not an especially vulnerable group; that the posts were not of an overly sensitive nature; and that they contained the kind of information likely to be shared in ordinary

conversation or in qualitative interviews with relative strangers. Nevertheless, care was taken to anonymise postings as far as is possible for online, publicly available data that is searchable.

Despite the ethical and methodological challenges, analysis of such digital sources is now commonplace within the study of the life-worlds of migrant communities in particular (Friedenberg 2011). Problems include knowing how representative of all British migrants the sample is, but this is true in most conventional qualitative research. The rich experiential accounts available on such discussion forums are an excellent resource for an exploratory study of emotional reflexivity. They provide self-produced testimony from a reasonably wide range of British migrants, who raise issues of importance to themselves, rather than addressing issues led by a researcher. The relative informality of the discussion forum allows for stories to be told that reveal the emotions involved in migration.

We selected one of the most popular (in terms of volume of traffic) internet-based discussion forums aimed at the British expatriate community in Australia. A very popular sub-forum on this site was titled 'Moving back to the UK'. Different threads in the sub-forum dealt with various aspects of return migration; we concentrated on one that began with the question: 'so who has returned to the UK and been happy'? The thread contained just over 250 separate posts by 64 different posters. The largest number of posts by any one person was 23; the lowest was one; and the average just under four. The first post was on 1 September 2009 and the last one considered here was made on 16 March 2010. Some basic information can be gleaned on the majority of those posting, but not all. Of the 64 posters, 29 were based in Australia and 27 in the United Kingdom. In eight cases their location was not identifiable. Sixteen of the posters appeared to be women and nine were identifiably men, whilst the genders of the rest were unclear. Of the 24 cases where it was possible to tell how long they lived in Australia, a small number had just arrived, the maximum stay was 35 years and the average about 13 years.

We replaced each forum posting name or pseudonym by a unique identifier code. Respondents were coded from 1-64, with gender identified as F, M or U (unknown) and location coded as A (Australia), UK or U (unknown). For example, poster 41-M-UK is case 41, a male now living in the United Kingdom, whilst 61-U-U is case 61 with gender and their current location unknown. It cannot be known how closely the socio-demographic characteristics of the posters on the forum reflect that of the population of interest. Further research would be needed to establish how typical the experiences of this sample are of most British migrants returning to the United Kingdom and any conclusions have to be made with this in mind. Nevertheless, the posts do provide direct insight into return migration.

Both authors read the posts separately and iteratively developed a thematic coding. The most prevalent themes in these discussions follow those found in studies of earlier cohorts of return migrants: obligations to family in the United Kingdom and feeling homesick or a 'lack of belonging'. The latter includes feelings of dislike or discomfort about Australia or the 'Australian way of life'.

To these, we add a factor not specifically highlighted in sociological studies, but which commonly appears in the posts: feeling disappointed that the shift to Australia failed to live up to 'the dream'. We use insights gained from the posts to consider whether the emotional aspects of migration might become more important in the contemporary context. Rather than individualisation weakening traditional family ties (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2003), we argue that, instead, it has changed them; expectations have been rendered uncertain (Craib 1994) and emotional reflexivity has become key in navigating relationships (Holmes 2010). Our analysis indicates the continued importance of family matters in migration decisions, and indicates their emotional weight (see also McLeod & Burrows 2013).

### **Family matters: feeling obliged**

Family obligations play an important part in return migration, but posters were often ambivalent when they reflexively tried to interpret their own and other people's emotions. Much existing literature on return migration and on transnational families (for example see Baldassar et al. 2007; Ryan 2008; Reynolds 2010; Sussman 2011) notes the emotional importance of family obligations, but often focuses on emotion management done in accordance with particular 'feeling rules' and 'emotion culture' (Ryan 2008). Emotional reflexivity is more about people trying to figure out what the feeling rules are as they shift and change over time and between cultures. What for example, are the rules concerning how one should feel about family obligations? The original post does not mention family, but a later post explains its importance as the initiator of the thread tries to decide whether to return. The thread begins with 01-F-A, who lives in Sydney, and has been in Australia for 24 years, asking:<sup>6</sup>

So who HAS returned to the UK & been happy? We hear about pingpongers, about the millions flooding over from the UK to Australia, but has anyone gone back and loved it, warts and all. We didn't return because we had everyone telling us 'country's gone to the dogs'. We believed them and stayed here in Sydney. We believed them, easy to do when everyone is chanting the same mantra. But who's out there who thinks life's good back in Blighty?

She elaborates in a later post on how the query came about:

We're driving our kids mad with our bickering over whether to go back or not. We're highly stressed (understatement) but much as our very Aussie kids have said clearly that they do not want to live in the UK, they've also said 'just make a bloody decision'. I think this shows just how it's affected them. I feel like a terrible mum for putting them through this, and then to think of dragging them to another country [...] what to do?



It is uncertain what the results of this emotional reflexivity will be in terms of action. A variety of emotional conflicts are evident as the poster was trying to decide 'whether to go back or not', most notably a sense of guilt about not fulfilling obligations as a mother.<sup>7</sup> This more privileged mother is reflecting on her guilt about upsetting the kids with indecision and potentially taking them away from their 'home'. Other migrants suggest that their feelings about family obligations were not guilt about 'dragging' their children to another country, but a longing for their children to get to know family in the United Kingdom. Several on the discussion list said that this prompted their return or plans to return.

We returned to live back in England in May after spending 4 years in Sydney. And I have to say we are still experiencing a culture shock, and really craving for the life we had over there. After much deliberating, we returned because we too really missed here, and we wanted to spend more time with our families and wanted our 2 year old son to get to know the many family members he has here. It broke our hearts for him to not to know all the people that loved him over here. Now we're here, the summer really was great, long evenings and we even had some really nice hot days. But we had forgotten how long winter lasts here, and the long dark nights are quite depressing to be frank! [...] There are however a lot of positive things, like being close to family, tv, feeling like you're in a place that's happening as we [...] got bored in Oz.  
(52-F-UK)

In this posting, feelings such as depression about the weather were reflexively compared to the emotional weight of how it 'broke [their] hearts' for their young son to not know his British family and these feelings were cited as key in their decision to return. Emotional reflexivity was required because rules about how one should feel in such a circumstance are not always clear and may alter. For example, different feelings inform 'hard decisions' as people move throughout the life-course, as another returnee noted:

People want and do different things. What is important for one is not always the most important for the next person. Things change too what might have been good for one person 5 years ago might not be now. Myself, Australia would have been my choice of place to live although I did miss family and friends alot I could afford the trips back [...] 5 years 2 children later things have changed [...] what is important for me now is having a huge extended family around us watching our kids grow up.  
(8-U-UK, *back in the United Kingdom for 1 year*)

The deliberations were clearly emotional in this and other responses, but they show how feeling obliged to family is weighed against pleasurable feelings related to the good weather and the ‘laid back’ Australian lifestyle. Some posters decided that family was most important, as was summed up in a post by 27-U-UK – back in the United Kingdom after 30 years in Australia:

We came back for family reasons [...] and this is why I think it's a good idea, for anyone in Australia and thinking of coming home, to hang in their [sic] and get your citizenship first. That way, when your duty to your children and grandparents is finally done [...] you are free to go back to your original plan and make your home in Australia. Sure, Britain is expensive, and England's infrastructure in particular is now bordering on such a state of disrepair that it surely qualifies as decrepit. But if you want your children to know their family well and experience them, it's a case of either coming home for a couple of months every year [...] or moving to Australia for a shorter while, getting citizenship, then coming back to Australia once your children have finished school. Provided you all have Australian citizenship [...] your children will be just as free as you to either make their own independent decision to join you or stay in the UK. But at least they will know their aunties, uncles, cousins and grandparents.

This displays considerable emotional reflexivity about living in Australia as a preference that is put on hold until ‘your duty to your children and grandparents’ is done and you no longer need to live where the generations can be together. The posters do not appear to be individualised individuals, free from family ties (Beck & Beck-Gersheim 2002). However, as the post above indicates, migrants miss not just family, but, as Hammerton and Thomson (2005) note, many experience ‘homesickness’ and a ‘lack of belonging’.

### **Homesickness and a lack of belonging**

The return migrants in our sample display emotional reflexivity in talking about failing to feel ‘at home’ in Australia. Discussion of homesickness amongst migrants and return migrants is not new (Hammerton & Thomson 2005; Ryan 2008), but some scholars argue that the ability to feel ‘at home’ beyond one's country of birth has become easier due to the decreased importance of locality within globalisation processes (Huber & O'Reilly 2004). However, we would argue that this ability is not universal, and failing to feel at home can motivate decisions to return to the United Kingdom, even amongst migrants who have spent most of their lives in Australia. One poster talked about hankering to return ‘home’ to the United Kingdom even though she migrated when she was just 10 and all her immediate family were in Australia:

I came to Oz when i was 10 yrs old back in 1974. I never felt i belonged here and have been back 3 times but its been 25 years since the last time. I am now in a position to return home, buy a

home and have money left over GREAT. My parents dont want to go back, my 2 kids 16yrs and 5yrs have never been and dont seem keen to go. Is there anybody like me who still longs for the feeling of belonging, its so hard to explain but I am not at peace here i have all ways had a feeling of i am just waiting for some thing, I am empty here I am also worried i will be displaced back home as i have been away so long.  
(30-F-A)

Here again, the reflexivity displayed indicates the ambivalence of emotions. Rather than managing emotions to fit expectations that she feel 'at home', a profound lack of a 'feeling of belonging' had remained with this person for 35 years. She hoped to find this back in the United Kingdom, even though she worried she would also feel 'displaced' there. Another poster responded by analysing his own feelings of 'displacement', which he thought was more profound than simple homesickness:

I haven't lived here quite as long as yourself, but I don't think anyone can really understand those feelings of displacement, not belonging, unless they feel them themselves [...] I believe It has nothing to do with the country, it could happen anywhere, and (as the two often get confused, I think) it goes a lot deeper than homesickness!! Homesickness is about missing home, displacement is simply about not belonging [...] whether you miss home or not.  
(27-M-A, *going to back to Essex in the UK in a month's time after many years in Australia*)

This migrant talked of his reflections on the hard to define bundle of emotions that produced a sense of belonging, of feeling 'at home', and others indicated that such feelings, and reflections upon them, were translated into migration practices and are thus emotionally reflexive:

We came back five years ago...I hadn't lived here permanently for over 30 years. My OH [other half] and two children had never been here and came along for the ride. ...When we were in the process of coming back I was thinking if it really is dire, I'll just go back to Australia. [...] Well, it wouldn't have mattered how dire it is. The moment I stepped onto terra firma my first thought was 'home at last, thank God'... I could finally feel my land beneath my feet. There's nothing like that feeling when you haven't had it for a long time. ... It's great to be back. So comfortable. Which kind of surprised me in some ways, given the nip in the air and the general dilapidated air about the place... Coming back home has been a bit like slipping into an old pair of shoes that fit so comfortably you never want to take them off. Materially we were better off in Australia. I had close friends

there and a reasonably good career. I'd just rather live here.  
(26-U-UK, *returned to Scotland 5 years ago after 30 years in Victoria/NSW*)

Here, the importance put on the emotionally overwhelming experience of feeling 'at home' suggests that emotional reflexivity in migration is not a matter of managing emotions according to feeling rules, but of how practices are guided by often difficult to voice and hard to control feelings, further complicated by uncertainty about what they 'should' feel. This is not to return emotions to some essential, asocial realm, but to consider that while emotional reflexivity has embodied, sensational aspects that are not easily captured by language (Holmes 2010), these strong but difficult to interpret (for migrants and researchers) experiences of liking or disliking of people or places clearly contribute to migration decisions and practices. The comfortable fit into home is presented here as outweighing feelings about close friendships left behind. This emphasis on needing to feel 'at home' clearly struck a chord with other migrants on the discussion forum who had decided to return:

I have given up explaining to [my husband] and other people how i feel, the emptiness, lack of feeling and general zombie like state i find myself in so often. It has taken me becoming pretty sick and basically telling my husband that i am going back home because its what i have to do and its up to him to come with me for him to finally agree. I know its not under the right circumstances and we will, no doubt be in for some rocky times ahead, but i must go home as the thought of being old and dying here is an unbearable thought.  
(36-F-A, *returning to the United Kingdom*)

The embodied as well as emotional aspects of 'homesickness' are evident here in this woman's account of 'becoming pretty sick' and her 'zombie like state,' and how this has prompted the decision to return, despite resistance from her husband and despite it being not 'under the right circumstances' and likely to mean 'rocky times ahead', presumably financially as well as personally. A number of other returnees on the discussion forum also reported that returning may be economically unwise, but that they didn't care because being 'home' made them feel they had 'come alive again' (42-F-UK, *returned to the United Kingdom 2 months ago after 6 years in Victoria*).

However, for some migrants the sense of belonging, of coming 'home', did not magically appear when they returned to their country of origin. Failure to feel at home, or lacking a sense of belonging, can combine with fear to produce forms of emotional reflexivity that might produce ping-ponging (migrating backwards and forwards between two countries). One returnee who had been back in the United Kingdom five months suggested that these feelings had been central to their migration and return decisions:

It is so hard when you emigrate because you open up a can of worms, as you never belong in either country [...] We don't know whether to go back but because finding jobs is so hard

and the house prices are up we are scared we will put ourselves back financially yet again. Four years after our move to Oz we still don't own a home and have to penny pinch all the time.  
(5-F-UK)

This poster again showed that people are not always clear about what feeling rules are appropriate, and how emotions should guide their actions; they thus have to exercise emotional reflexivity. 'Ping-ponging' is not something done lightly but a search for belonging seems to play a major part in it for the members of this forum. The experience can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Another forum member notes how she now felt she 'will never belong anywhere' and 'the whole experience of moving back...has worn [her] out' (5-F-UK). This is further indication of the embodied aspects of emotional reflexivity.

The postings also suggest how the emotional reflexivity prompted by and prompting return migration often sits somewhere between the 'joyous' and the 'worn out,' and results in people feeling more settled:

My Aussie hubby, me and our three children under 10 returned to the UK [...] after sampling life in Brisbane. I have never regretted the decision although we have had some emotional struggles to deal with. We are all happy back here and our lives have pretty much picked up where they left off [...] big difference is that I now see my Country through different eyes – better eyes. A few UK people have thought we were crazy to return – mostly people who have never visited Oz [...] but thats their problem [...] I had almost been programmed into thinking life in Oz would be better (media, people on the street and my husband were all guilty of this) and I was terrified of short changing my children by not living there when we had the opportunity [...] I was not naïve – we have visited Brisbane 5 times in the last ten years and I love what it has to offer. It just offered us a DIFFERENT life NOT a BETTER life.  
(62-F-UK, *back in England for 1 year*)

The phrase 'emotional struggles' suggests some effort to reflexively interpret and act on the feelings this poster experienced. The result was a new sense for this migrant that she knew she wanted to live in the United Kingdom. She felt that Australia offered a 'different' life rather than the 'better' life promised by 'media, people on the street and [her] husband'. Previous studies found that this dream of a better life was a key motivation for British migration to Australia (Appleyard et al. 1988; Hammerton & Thomson 2005). However, disappointment in not realising the dream may also motivate return.

## Disappointed dreams

Disappointment is arguably crucial to emotional reflexivity because people cannot calculate what they might expect in a rapidly changing world (see Craib 1994). Explanations of return migration have been largely based on theoretical economic models focused on rational choice that explain disappointment as a 'rational' response to 'failed' migration (see Herzog & Schottman 1983). The alternative sociology of emotions approach drawn on here suggests instead that feeling disappointed is common because people are unclear about what they might expect to experience or to feel (Craib 1994: 3) before they migrate. In talking of their disappointment, posters indicate that simplistic cost-benefit analyses are not always possible or effective when dreaming and deliberating about escaping to a better life.

Australia, oddly enough for a nation that began as a British penal colony, has become a symbol of escape from what is perceived as the 'bad' weather, poor lifestyle and dilapidation of Britain. Yet, like all 'escape attempts' (Cohen & Taylor 1992), migration exchanges one routinised and bureaucratised way of life for a slightly different one. People who migrate do not always like it as much as they hope they will:

People leave for all different reasons [...] . they then return because they can't settle [...] because they simply do not like living in Australia as much as they anticipated they would [...] some people do find it rather dull compared to life in the UK (something people can't possibly know or anticipate until you've tried it).

*(27-M-UK, about to move back to Essex, England)*

Migrants cannot always anticipate that their new life might be boring, or how it might otherwise feel and be. This means that migrants cannot simply base their decisions on rational choice; they also rely on emotions. Their return is often discussed in terms of their feelings of disappointment. There are numerous posts on the forum describing disappointment at finding Australia 'dull', or boring. Many who make the shift to Australia do not find the dream life they hoped for. One for example wrote:

Better life has not happened for us personally, more [sic, nor?] for the kids (kids dont like the beach) nicer weather (but they cant run round playing sports etc, cause its too hot) better prospects, both myself and my OH [other half] have had to take de-motions in work, so therefore all the reasons we came out here in the first place do not outshine what is back there!!!!

*(33-F-A, Queensland)*

Disappointment is not the cause of migration or remigration, but an effect of finding that no dream lasts forever and that everyday reality can also be hard or unexciting in Australia. It is likely to be a factor in remigration decisions if the

actual conditions of living experienced clash particularly badly with the hopes and dreams of a new life that were invested in the original move 'Downunder'. Instead of 'escaping,' people can feel 'trapped,' as this next post suggests:

I went back to [...] North Wales [...] to visit family last year – absolutely loved it – scenery, people, TV even shops (M&S particularly!) even fish and chips was better [...] and returning to Oz was very hard indeed – felt sick in my stomach for weeks and lost all interest in everything [...] took a friend to suggest I return home for good that made me realise that I wasn't 'trapped' here (been here 14 years) so ever since then I have been making plans to return home – house on market and hope to settle sale so I can be back in time for Christmas with family [...] realise it will be harder to get job than it is in Sydney and that the money won't be the same – but really don't care – after commuting 3 hours plus a day particularly in summer on often hot dirty crowded trains followed by a 20 minute walk home – well I'm just over that and about as much chance of finding work in the area where I live in OZ (can't afford to live anywhere else) is about same as finding work in North Wales.  
(23-U-A, *returning to Wales after 14 years in Sydney*)

Commuting three hours a day on a hot, crowded Sydney train is not what British people imagine, nor what most portrayals depict, as the dream Australian lifestyle. Like everywhere, access to that lifestyle can depend a great deal on where you can afford to live and what resources you can draw on to enjoy life. This was clear in the description below from the same poster, a few months later:

I sold my house finally on Friday. Wanted to be back in UK with family for Christmas, but as it took longer than anticipated to get price I was after [...] It has been horribly hot, humid and depressing quite frankly here these last few days and supposed to be pretty much same throughout summer – only sign of life are the crows with their mournful cry – I could compare the area/street as being likened to post nuclear holocaust – everyone safely sealed behind closed doors, blinds, roller shutters, you name it with air conditioning units blaring. This morning, after a fitful night's sleep with fan going all night – woke to a kitchen full of ants – stupidly left a few fruit scraps out and cat hadn't finished his dinner – they were everywhere – I feel itchy now just thinking about it! Took fish and chips to only half decent pub around here – there appears to be only one per suburb and most you wouldn't want to set foot in – yesterday afternoon and sat on balcony and had a beer – but the rough types sitting behind – it was like I suppose I can only describe it as like being in a recreation area of a jail...but the language and aggressive conversation – yuk [...] let's go back home I said and watch tv [...] I realise that there are lovely areas here and



nicer pubs – but from where I live you'd have a good 45 min drive to get to nearest coast – the only other form of recreation is 'shopping' and 'eating' – no wonder there are so many morbidly obese people around here!!! Mcdonalds and similar are EVERYWHERE too! Yes I probably should have upped and left area and moved to a better area – but I had to be 'commutable' to city, I have pets and not enough money to move to one of the nicer areas unfortunately!  
(23-U-A)

As this posting showed, if migrants cannot afford the 'lovely' areas, then the 'dream' lifestyle may seem a long way off. The post even mentioned thinking that the pub balcony looked like a jail yard, reinforcing how the poster seemed to feel about being trapped by the heat, 'sealed behind closed doors'. From an Australian point of view these hankerings might seem Eurocentric (it's 'too hot', 'too far away' (from where?)) and the posting above seems to describe someone who has found themselves living in a working class area where they feel uncomfortable. Certainly it does not sound like Ramsey St in *Neighbours* or Summer Bay in *Home and Away*. British migrants may not expect Australia to be like it is in those television shows, but they do expect, it seems, a 'better' life in which they can feel 'comfortable', or at least not 'depressed'.

## Conclusions

Return migration is a common, but under-researched, phenomenon and there are no other recent qualitative studies of return migration from Australia to the United Kingdom. This account used the concept of emotional reflexivity to explore current British return migration and 'ping-ponging'. As studies of earlier waves of migration to Australia suggest, many people still feel obliged to be near their families and want their children to know their grandparents. This challenges individualisation theories (for example, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2003), which propose that the strength of family ties has been reduced by social changes including increased mobility. Also important in return migration is a search for a feeling of belonging, of feeling at home (Appleyard 1964; Hammerton & Thomson 2005). The other most striking theme in the posts we examined is the disappointed dreams of return migrants. People do shift for economic, career and 'lifestyle' reasons, and then shift back for those same reasons as well as to be with family and to feel 'at home'. However, people also migrate to 'escape', to find a 'dream life' that they think will release them from everyday cares and the tedium of routines, which in their home country they might see stretch out in front of them in predictable rows of years.

As shown in our analysis of more than six months of postings to the discussion forum, migration decisions illustrate how emotional reflexivity is required to interpret one's own and other people's emotions, under social conditions in which feeling rules are not always clear and may be rapidly changing. Trying to capture the complex and ambivalent emotional experience of migration is a difficult task, for migrants and for those studying migration (Jacobs 2011).



Emotional reflexivity for these posters involved them weighing and comparing feelings of pleasure about good weather and lifestyle with emotions about personal connections to others back home. When they migrated, many of the posters realised that feeling close to family and 'at home' was most important to them; and/or that they preferred the 'comfortable old pair of slippers'. For those that returned to the United Kingdom, pursuit of a dream life in Australia had tended to result in disappointment. The dream had not included feeling oppressed by the heat, the mosquitoes, commuting to work, struggling to find 'a decent pub', or feeling bored.

Rather than being 'individualised individuals' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), these are individuals who are reflexive in ways that draw on their feelings about their embodied experiences and their relationships to others (Holmes 2010). These are people who took a risk and deliberately went in search of a new life. They were emotionally reflexive in embracing this novelty, this difference, not as a project of the self, but in the spirit of an age-old search for something 'better'. That family and place feature so strongly in explaining why these migrants returned suggests that what might constitute a 'better' life is for many people *not* determined by personal success and instant gratification of rather shallow desires. A 'better' life for most return migrants is about a complex of feelings, rather than a rational choice about sun or rain, better or worse houses and jobs, or getting good fish and chips.

Further, staying put in Australia does not mean that migrants are 'living the dream'. They may have found some sense of belonging, or perhaps decided that there are advantages to not belonging. They may be 'trapped' by circumstances or feelings of obligation to others 'here' rather than 'there'. They might struggle to align their hopes of happiness with the economic, embodied and emotional realities of everyday life. Yet trying to understand the crucial part that emotions play in 'ping-ponging' is vital to appreciating what might help future migrants in their decisions.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See, *inter alia*, Appleyard (1964), Appleyard and colleagues (1988), Roe (2002), Jupp (2004) and Hammerton and Thomson (2005).
- 2 See, *inter alia*, Appleyard (1962a; 1962b), Richardson (1968), Lukomskyi and Richards (1986), Hugo (1995), Hammerton and Thomson (2005), Richards (2005), Sanderson (2009). Studies on similar return migration from Australia from other places include Lever-Tracy (1989).
- 3 This figure is roughly equivalent to almost two per cent of the total UK population in 2010.
- 4 However, settlers from the United Kingdom no longer form the largest number of new permanent arrivals to Australia. In 2009-2010 there were 18,119 from New Zealand, 16,644 from China and 15,626 from India compared to the 15,555 from the United Kingdom.
- 5 Although, as we shall see, this notion of ‘permanently leaving’ is a complex one as, whatever the intentions of emigrants might be, significant numbers often return. Appleyard and colleagues (1988) estimate that between a third and a half of their sample of British returnees went back to Australia.
- 6 Note all posts are displayed as posted textually – but reformatted – including minor grammatical errors etc. Edited text is indicated as [...].
- 7 Most of the migration literature discusses mothers’ guilt in terms of women leaving children behind to earn a living overseas (*inter alia* Hochschild 2003; Fresnoza-Flot 2009).